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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the differences between locative expressions in Kpelle and English, based on the dialect of one native speaker of Kpelle. It discusses the crucial role of the reference object in defining the meaning of locatives in Kpelle, in contrast to English, where the characteristics of the object to be located are less important. An explanation for this asymmetry in Kpelle can be found in the fact that the locatives are actually nouns whose referent are regions of the reference object. From a broader perspective, a study of cross-linguistic variation in spatial language is a necessary step in describing the truly universal aspects of locative expressions. (MDM)

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Locatives in Kpelle

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ED 375 673

1. Abstract

Ways of expressing spatial relations vary from language to language. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate in detail some differences between locative expressions in Kpelle and in English. The data are based on the dialect of one speaker of Kpelle.

We will see that various characteristics of the reference object are crucial in defining the meaning of locatives in Kpelle. In contrast, the characteristics of the object to be located are less important. Landau and Jackendoff have suggested that this is the usual case (1993:228). In the case of Kpelle, an explanation for this asymmetry can be found in the fact that the locatives are actually nouns whose referents are regions of the reference object.

From a broader perspective, a study of cross-linguistic variation in spatial language is a necessary step in describing the truly universal aspects of locative expressions.

2. Locatives as nouns

A brief digression into lexical categories will be helpful in understanding locative expressions in Kpelle. Welmers has noted that superficial studies of Kpelle and other Mande languages have referred to locatives as 'postpositions,' since they function like English prepositions. "But this is only a semantic parallel, not a structural or functional parallel in any sense." (Welmers 1969:82). Rather, Welmers argues, locatives in Mande languages should be analyzed as nouns. There are two arguments for this view. First, "(...) a number of these so-called 'postpositions' also function as ordinary human or animal body parts." (Welmers 1973:216). This is illustrated below; this ambiguous phrase can mean either "Flomo's back" or "behind Flomo."

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1. [flómó polù][1]
   Flomo back
   "Flomo's back"
   or
   "behind Flomo"

In fact, all the locative expressions discussed in this paper are syntactically identical to NPs expressing inalienable possession.

The second reason for claiming that Kpelle locatives are nouns is that "almost all of the words in question, even those not thought of as body parts in the strict sense, may also, with a possessor, be used as the subject or object of a sentence--that is, in any typical nominal usage" (Welmers 1973:216). Locatives in subject and object positions are shown in sentences 2 and 3, respectively.

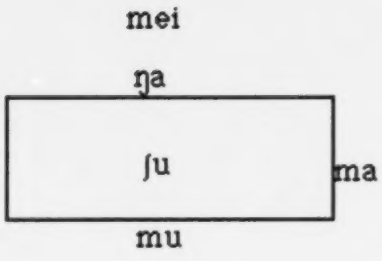
2. [é:spai ʃu lîbei]
   refrigerator inside dirty
   "The inside of the refrigerator is dirty."

3. [ŋá tébəle ŋá méi pìn ke]
   1-sg table top paint do
   "I'm painting the top of the table."

3. Some Kpelle locatives and their meanings

The most prototypical meanings of some of the locatives discussed in this paper are schematized in the diagram below. The box represents the reference object, viewed from one side.

[1]The transcription used here is broadly phonetic. Vowels without tone marking should be assumed to have mid tone.



4.

Locative sentences may be seen as ways of expressing figure-ground relationships. In what follows, the object to be located will be called 'figure,' and the reference object will be called 'ground.'

3.2 *Mei* 'top, area above' and *ma* 'side[2]'

The English 'on' may be rendered as either *mei* or *ma* in Kpelle, but, in most cases, the two locatives cannot be used interchangeably. The examples and truth conditions given below will help define the difference between the two.

5. X Y mei: X is above Y, at an unspecified distance from Y.
If X and Y are in contact, X touches Y's top, rather than its side.

Sentence 6 can describe the location of either bee in the picture below.

6. [á ɲai mèi]
3-sg water-def top
"It is over the water."

The following example shows that the figure does not necessarily have to be smaller than the ground; also, the figure doesn't have to be limited to the area immediately above the ground.

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[2]*Mà* is actually a third person form only, best glossed as 'its side.' In the expressions *má* 'my side' (tonally different from the third person singular, which has low tone), *ja* 'your side,' *kwa* 'our side,' etc., a different pronominal form is used. The other locatives also co-occur with these pronominal forms; what is different about *ma* is the appearance of [m] in the first and third person singular. Perhaps the underlying form of *ma* is the morpheme /à/, with the addition of [m] in the first and third person singular. This is not directly relevant to the issues discussed in this paper.

7. [wurí à tói bèré mèi]
tree-def 3-sg stand house-def top
"The tree is standing over the house."

This locative can also be used in describing objects in contact, as seen in the following examples. Sentence 8 refers to the topmost paper on the pile of papers shown in the next picture.

8. [gololái à lái màréi mèi]
paper 3-sg lie other top
"The paper is on top of the other papers."

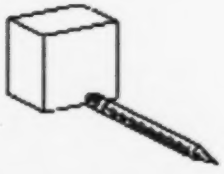
The next examples illustrate the difference between *mei* and *ma*.

9. [mei] [mei] [ma]

These three pictures, containing geometric figures for which the informant had no readily accessible Kpelle term, show that the choice of one locative over the other is not determined by phonological factors. It is also clear that *mei* and *ma* are not simply associated with two different groups of nouns in some arbitrary manner.

Ma typically refers to the side of an object. The examples below will support adopting the following definition:

10. X Y ma: X is in contact with Y's side.



11. [kɔlɔ kpáwi ká: kàtúŋ mà]
pencil be box side
"The pencil is on the box; the pencil is in contact with the box."

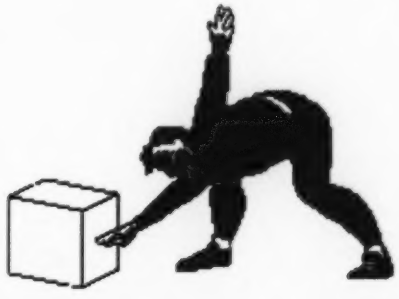
The following pair of sentences illustrate the contrast between *mei* and *ma:*

12. [wuɾí à lái bèɾé mèi]
tree 3-sg lie house top
"The tree is lying on top of the house, leaning on the roof."

13. [wuɾí à lái bèɾé mà]
tree 3-sg lie house side
"The tree is lying on top of the house, leaning on a wall."

A difference between English and Kpelle emerges here. The English 'on' expresses a spatial relationship such that, typically, the figure is above the ground, in contact with it, and supported by it. In Kpelle, the factors determining the choice of locative are different. Whether the ground supports the figure or not is irrelevant. Instead, *mei* crucially expresses the spatial relation of the figure being above the ground; contact is irrelevant. The central meaning of *ma* is that figure and ground are in contact, and usually the point of contact is the ground's side.

In addition, there is some evidence that, if *ma* is used without a verb expressing motion or location, then the figure must in complete contact with the side of the ground. For the next picture, it is possible to say that the man's hand is "at the side of the box," as in sentence 14. However, it is not appropriate to say that the man himself is located "at the side of the box," as shown in sentence 15.



14. [ɲé: kǎ: kʌ̀túŋ mà]
3-sg-poss-hand be box side
"His hand is on the box."

15. *[a kʌ̀túŋ mà]
3-sg box side

In the next picture, there is a small space between the bear and the box. Therefore, it is not possible to say that the bear is located "at the side of the box," as in sentence 16. However, this sentence is acceptable with the addition of the verb 'leaning,' as shown in 17.

16. *[dʒuai a kʌ̀túŋ mà]
animal-def 3-sg-pres box side

17. [dʒuai a tĩ̀ni kʌ̀túŋ mà]
animal-def 3-sg-pres leaning box side
"The animal is leaning on the box."

More research will be needed in order to characterize accurately this interesting interaction between the locative and the verb.

3.3 ŋa 'surface, peak'

As sentences 18 - 20 show, *ŋa* can refer to the surface of an object.

18. [púmú a ʃiái ɲái ŋà]
insect 3-sg walk water-def surface
"An insect is walking on the water."

19. [li ká tébəle ŋà]
cooking pot be table surface
"There is a cooking pot on the table."

20. [lí: wurí ŋa ka]
go tree surface look
"Go look in the tree" (to see if there are any oranges).

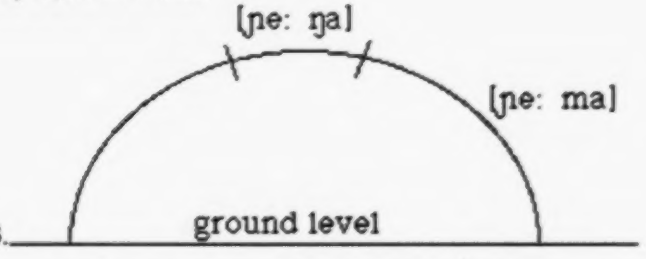
However, *ŋa* can also express another spatial relation. If the ground is a three-dimensional object, *ŋa* can refer to its tip or peak. This is especially clear when the ground is an oblong object, as in 21 - 22:

21. [moai ŋá ʃɔ́:]
"Sharpen (the peak, blade of) the knife." (Welmers 1969:82)

22. [lulú a ʃé?é ŋgo: ŋà]
fly 3-sg sit leg- tip
1-sg-poss
"A fly is sitting on the sole of my foot."

The same principle can still be seen to apply to objects which are not clearly elongated, such as a hill.

23.



ɲe: ŋa refers to the top of the hill, while *ɲe: ma* refers to any part of the hill above ground level.

Therefore, it seems *ŋa* should be defined as follows:

24. X Y ŋa: X is in contact with the surface or tip of Y.

A concern is that it does not seem possible to predict whether *ŋa* will refer to the surface or tip of a three-dimensional object. According to Gay and Welmers, *wuri ŋa* (as in sentence 20) means 'treetop' (1971:31), but, according to the informant for this study, it does not.

The examples we have seen so far show that there is some overlap between the spatial relationships expressed by *ma* and *ŋa*. Sentences 25 - 26 illustrate an interesting contrast between the two:

25.	[ʃíʃán	a	lílí	loei	ŋà]
	plant	3-sg	grow	land-def	surface

"Plants are growing (flourishing) on the land (country)."

26.	[ʃíʃán	a	lílí	loei	mà]
	plant	3-sg	grow	land-def	on

"Plants are growing (flourishing) on the land (soil)."

The term *loei* is ambiguous in that it can refer to floor, ground, soil, a country, or the Earth. Sentence 25 could be used to say that plants grow better in Liberia than in Mali. In contrast, sentence 26 would be an appropriate answer to the question: "Do plants grow better in soil or in the air?" Sentences 27 - 28 illustrate a similar contrast:

27.	[loei	ŋa:	w̃o:	ka:	à	dì	gbìnì]
	land	surface	voice	be	adv. marker?	3-pl	different

"The languages spoken in other parts of the world are different."

28.	[loei	má	w̃o:	ka:	à	dì	gbìnì]
	land	on	voice	be	adv. marker?	3-pl	different

"What you say when speaking in secret is different from what I say when speaking in secret."

These may be idiomatic expressions; this particular contrast has emerged only in sentences involving *loei*.

3.4 ʃu 'interior'

ʃu corresponds fairly closely to the relation expressed by 'in' in English; the meaning of this locative is simply this:

29. X Y ʃu: X is at least partly contained in Y

The figure may be completely contained in the ground, as in this example:

30. [já ká kopoi ʃù]
water be cup interior
"There is water in the cup."

It is also possible for the figure to be only partially contained in the ground. Sentence 31 can describe the location of any of the boats in this picture:

31. [á ɲai ʃù]
3-sg water-def interior
"It is in/on the water."

3.5 Mu 'underside'

Mu corresponds to the English 'under.' For instance, sentence 31 can express the location of the sheet of paper at the bottom of this pile:

32. [gololái à lái màréi mu]
paper 3-sg lie other underside
"The paper is under the other papers."

In some cases, however, *mu* translates as 'in':

33. [bèré mu]
house underside
"in the house"

Gay and Welmers have noted that this happens when the ground is "an object which is like an inverted cup" (1971:31). Since traditional houses do have the shape of an inverted cup, this explains the usage above. I verified this idea by asking for the location of the ant crawling into the cone in this picture:

34. [pumúi a kú:ŋ mù]
ant-def 3-sg-pres cone underside
"The ant is in the cone."

It turns out that, so long as the cone is hollow, this spatial relationship is expressed with *mu*. This usage of *mu* is extended to the case where the building is a modern one, not shaped like an inverted cup. For instance, the location of a person at the top floor or a very tall building is still described as *beDe mu*. The meaning of *mu* can then be defined as follows:

35. X Y mu: X is contained in the space under Y.

3.6 Some other locatives

The above discussion of Kpelle locatives is far from being exhaustive. Various names of body parts are also used in a locative sense:

36. [nowái e ɲálé ká win:oi là]
Nowai 3-sg-past cat see window mouth
"Nowai saw the cat in the window" or
"Nowai saw the cat from the window."

37. [bɔro ká: flomo w̃à]
hat be Flomo head
"There is a hat on Flomo's head."

38. [lulú ka: w̃alì]
fly be 1-sg-poss-ear
"There is a fly in my ear."

These brief examples support the idea that, syntactically, location is represented as a property of the ground, not as a relationship between figure and ground.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that descriptions of the locations of objects in Kpelle differ from their English counterparts. These results suggest a caveat in researching languages which are not well known. If a researcher assumes that spatial relationships will be expressed similarly in other languages, it is possible to miss these differences. For example, one researcher suggested that the Kpelle locative *mu* means 'the space inside' (Thach 1981:72). Unfortunately, the only example given is *pere mu*.

Since ways of expressing spatial relations vary from language to language, a natural question to ask is: what aspects of locative expressions are universal? In discussing spatial deixis, Weissenborn and Klein have proposed that perhaps "certain parameters are more basic than others and should therefore be found in every deictic system, as for example the contrast 'proximal' vs. 'distal' with respect to the speaker" (1982:4-5). They suggest that an implicational hierarchy (similar to the one suggested by Berlin and Kay for color terms) might be found among these parameters involved in spatial relationships.

Landau and Jackendoff suggest a "rather comprehensive enumeration of the factors involved in defining the spatial relations expressed in English: the totality of meanings of spatial prepositions" (1993:224). These factors divide into four classes:

- Asymmetry between figure and reference object
- The geometry of the reference object
- The geometry of the figure object
- The geometry of the region based on the reference object.

In Kpelle, as we have seen, the characteristics of the ground (the reference object) are more important than those of the figure. This follows from the fact that the locative noun's referent is some part (surface, top...) of the ground. This is in keeping with Landau and Jackendoff's findings; they point out that very few

characteristics of the figure and ground need to be specified in locative expressions, and that the figure needs even less specification than the ground does. "It is as if the spatial relations expressed by prepositions filter object descriptions, removing much of the detail of object shape and preserving only certain key properties, primarily the boundedness, surface, or volumetric nature of an object and its axial structure" (Landau and Jackendoff 1993:232).

The examples given in this paper suggest that some of these key properties are more important than others for Kpelle speakers, and that sometimes it is necessary to make finer distinctions in order to choose the appropriate locative. For instance, we have seen that it matters whether the ground has the shape of an inverted cup, and whether it can be thought of as a mouth. Further study of cross-linguistic variation in this area would be needed in order to determine the total set of linguistically significant factors involved in spatial representations.

Finally, the data discussed above point out the necessity of considering whether cross-linguistic differences in spatial language imply that there are actual differences in spatial representations for speakers of different languages.

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